

Muslim Denomination in Bulgaria

(Grand Mufti's Office in the Republic of Bulgaria)

Address: 1301 Sofia, 27, Bratia Miladinovi Str.; phone: +359 2 9816001, fax: +359 2 9803058;

e-mail: info@grandmufti.bg; web: www.grandmufti.bg

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Muslim community in Bulgaria increasingly concerned about the hate motivated incidents perpetrated against Muslims and holy sides. Intolerant discourse and hate crimes increase the feeling of insecurity among the targeted groups and inflame tensions in the society. These ideas of intolerance are disseminated and supported by aggressive nationalists, organizations and political formations which make statements to detriment of the whole society and Muslims' religious rights in particular. The most alarming is that there's almost no sentenced perpetrator for hate crime.

Followings are the registered anti-Muslim incidents for 2014:

Attack against the mosque in Pazardjik: Swastikas and offensive words were drawn on the walls of the central mosque in Pazardjik on 13 January, 2014. The mosque in Pazardjik has been a subject of attacks repeatedly. The mosque is a monument of culture and it has been added in the list of UNESCO;

Anti-Muslim manifestation in Plovdiv: Two Fridays one after another, on 7 and 14 February, more than 1,000 people from all over Bulgaria, took part in a protest in Plovdiv against court applications by the Muslim denomination, for the return of the five century-year-old Kursun mosque in Karlovo as part of a series of cases requesting the government to return foundation properties that were seized and illegally nationalized during the Totalitarian regime. On February 14, hurling paving stones, rocks and fireworks, a large mob of protesters smashed windows of the historic Dzhumaya Mosque in the centre of second biggest city in Bulgaria-Plovdiv. While the crowd were at the mosque, each blast of a firecracker or sound of breaking glass was being greeted by cheers from the mob. Among other things, protesters held posters reading "Bulgarian land – we will not give away a single stone", "If we lose control of Bulgaria, we lose everything", "Stop the Islamicisation of Bulgaria" and "Down with the MRF", the last being a reference to the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, a party led and supported mainly by Bulgarians of ethnic Turkish descent and the Muslim faith. Journalists quoted protest organiser and leader of Bulgarian football fan clubs Elena Vatashka as saying that it was "unacceptable

that a country like Bulgaria, a member state of the European Union, could allow the Grand Mufti to own land and property. The court should take account of public opinion but not of political parties”, she said. The court applications have been lodged under the country’s Religious Denominations Act, which makes provision for such applications by all officially recognised religious groups in Bulgaria. Muslim and Turkish symbols are a preferred target for hatred among ultra-nationalist groups in Bulgaria. Most of the protesters are football fan clubs organizations such as CSKA, Levski, Botev, and Lokomotiv. The protest was supported by some public personalities like the mayor of Karlovo who had previously organized protest and petition in Karlovo, political parties such as VMRO and some other ultra nationalist movements. Similarly, public institutions and personalities organized and supported protests and petitions in other municipalities where Muslim denomination brought a lawsuit. The protests were covered by national and local media;

Graffiti on the wall of Higher Institute of Islamic Studies in Sofia: Swastika and offensive slogans such as “Out, Turks!”, “Nazi Boys!” were drawn on the fence wall of Higher Institute of Islamic Studies in Sofia. Cameras show that perpetrators in disguise had come by car on 15 February at around 11:40 a.m . The case was reported to the police on 17 February;

Attack against the mosque in Shumen: Graffiti slogans as “Death to you!” were drawn on the wall of Killak mosque in Shumen. Local Muslims saw it on 16 March, 2014;

Attack against the mosque in Asenovgrad: On 15 May local Muslims found out spray-painted swastika and slogans as: “Turks”, “Mangals” (means Gypsies), “sawn” (means circumcised) on the wall of the old mosque in town of Asenovgrad;

Attack against the mosque in Gotse Delchev: On 19 June, Karadja mosque in Gotse Delchev woke up to find two meter-cross assembled on the minaret. This mosque is a monument of culture, but falls into decay. It’s important to remind that the Muslim community went to law for reinstating the community in its possession. The case is up before the court. It’s an interesting fact that few days before the incident an NGO named “Aktivna savest” (Active conscience) and the members of political party VMRO organized protest at the court against restitution of the properties and mosque to the Muslim community. In this day Bulgarian national flag was fixed into the minaret and launch a slogan “Do not give Erdogan a favor” hinting at the former prime minister of Turkey. These cases were covered by the local and national media. The local Muslim authority condemned this provocative act;

Attack against the mosque in Popovo, Targovishte: On 20 June local Muslims found out spray-painted offensive words on the wall of the mosque in town of Popovo such as: “Death to Turks and Gypsies”, “Gypsies into soap, Turks under the knife”, there were swastikas as well;

Attack against the mosque in Blagoevgrad: On 16 September the mosque in Blagoevgrad was desecrated once again. Swastikas and slogans such as “Death” “We will not forget Bunovo” (allude to the attack of perpetrators from Turkish origin on the train station “Bunovo” during Totalitarian regime). The mosque has been subject to numerous hostile incidents.

Freedom of religion and belief and their inviolability are the constitutional rights of Bulgarian citizens. Although the rights of confession are legally regulated, in fact there is negligence of the legislation and the commitments. The attitude of the law enforcement and police officials toward citizens is alarming.

An example is the arrest and interrogation of a citizen for his religious affiliation and service.

The case of Filipovtsi: On 15 August two police cars arrived at the home of S. A. from residential district Filipovtsi in Sofia. After a short talk S. A. was pointedly taken away to 9th Regional Police Station in Sofia in the presence of his family and neighbors. This arrest was without good reasons and necessary order by Prosecution Office.

S. A. has been interrogated and obliged to answer the questions about his religious preferences and practices, namely takes part in the courses for Quran organized by Grand Mufti’s Office, helping the people and community, takes part in charity events during the month of Ramadan and Friday service in the Sofia mosque. This threatening interrogation completed with a request for a next meeting which would probably be outside of the Polis station in a café.

According to the legislation performing the religious practices is not a crime, but this type of putting questions to him is a violation of the freedom of religion and belief, hence the human rights of the person.

We consider that such cases are designed to threaten, intimidate and suppress the Muslims. We are deeply disturbed by the proliferation of these cases in the country, which are obviously discrediting democratic principles and creating preconditions for religious based intolerance and discrimination.

As a result of similar act by the law enforcement a year ago the President of the local Muslim trustees resigned his position. Aforementioned refers to person who is not an employee in the denomination, which further disturbs us in regard to the fact that it happens to an ordinary people.

Such acts are in violation of the freedom of religion and belief and cause inciting hatred on religious grounds and obstruct the right of every person to choose their beliefs. These actions leave a negative impression in the people's minds about Muslims, hence a negative attitude against the Muslims.

We call upon the OSCE and responsible national authorities to address these cases.

In this respect we encourage the **National authorities to:**

- To take necessary measures against bias motivated incidents against Muslim and their holy places.
- Implement effectively the commitments to freedom of religion or belief and anti-discriminatory legislation;
- We urge the responsible authorities to address these issues for their employees, so that they would be more careful and sensitive in cases where the subject of their work is the religious beliefs of citizens;
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- To use ODIHR's experience and expertise in combating anti-Muslim hate crimes by law enforcement officers;
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- Urge on educational institutions to use the Guidelines for Educators on Countering Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims, co-published by OSCE, UNESCO and CoE;

We encourage OSCE/ODIHR:

- The forthcoming Serbian Chairmanship of OSCE to attach great importance to Islamophobia and intolerance and discrimination against Muslims;
- ODIHR to observe closely the process of combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims, as well as the Freedom of Religion of Muslim minorities in non-Muslim countries;
- OSCE/ODIHR Advisory Panel on Freedom of Religion or Belief to have a greater role in the work of the OSCE on further implementation of the freedom of religion or belief in all participating States;
- ODIHR to continue with the training programs on responding to hate crimes and all kind of intolerance for law enforcement, educators, NGOs and representatives of religious organizations.